



ACSC Quick-Look

Catalyst for Air & Space Power Research Dialogue



Vietnam: Current Operational Lessons From History

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Discussion. The US involvement in Vietnam from the Kennedy to the Nixon administrations was marked by changes in strategy. Initial US assistance to the South Vietnamese government centered on President Kennedy's emphasis on counterinsurgency and nation building. Though the State Department accurately characterized the strife as an "invasion" by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV or North Vietnam) early on, the major enemy was still identified as the Viet Cong (VC), or indigenous southern communists. For its part, the DRV attempted to characterize the conflict as a civil war rather than an interstate war. Bungled elections and the subsequent division of Vietnam into North and South lent credibility to the Communist claims that South Vietnam (RVN or Republic of Vietnam) was a US puppet. Tacit US approval of the coup against the Diem regime in 1963 lent additional credence to Communist claims.

Early efforts against the VC were guided by advice from Sir Robert Thompson, the British counterinsurgency expert who led the successful long-term campaign to rid Malaya of communist guerrillas. However, contextual elements prevailing in Malaya were notably absent in Vietnam. The idea of concentrating "at risk" population in "strategic hamlets" for easier defense worked in Malaya, but failed in Vietnam both because the program was too ambitious and because rural Vietnamese society was traditionally rooted to ancestral land. The plan was eventually abandoned.

US military assistance originally consisted of Army Special Forces, who organized Montagnard tribesmen of the South Vietnamese borderlands into Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG) to monitor infiltration into the RVN from the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Although they were very successful at this effort, in retrospect, the Special Forces could have been used to good effect in organizing villages for defense in the populated part of the RVN (i.e., 90 percent of the RVN population lived within 10 miles of the coast or in the Mekong Delta). In this regard, the US Marine Corps originally entered Vietnam with a superb counterinsurgency doctrine (the "ink-blot" strategy), wherein Combined Action Program (CAP) units (down to squad level) would *live* in Vietnamese villages to train local defense forces and call down artillery and air strikes against enemy main attacks.

The dynamics of the war changed in early 1965 when both the US and the DRV introduced main force regular units into the RVN. General William C. Westmoreland, Commander US Military Assistance Command Vietnam, discarded the "clear and hold" strategy and introduced sweeps by US divisions in the largely unpopulated interior of the RVN to chase down and destroy main force units of the VC and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). This allowed local VC organizations to establish and maintain shadow governments throughout most of the south, extorting taxes, rice, and recruits from the villages. This tactic flourished because US units never remained in one place and thus let the enemy "own the night."

The Johnson Administration did not allow Westmoreland the latitude to employ maneuver to pursue and destroy NVA units and bases outside the RVN, leaving him with the non-strategy of attrition. This ultimately failed because when Americans began to attrit Communist forces to unacceptable levels, the NVA simply retreated to base areas outside the country thus preserving their combat capabilities.

In January of 1968, the Communists initiated the Tet Offensive, designed to trigger a nation-wide uprising against the government of the RVN. Due to bad coordination by the NVA and tenacious fighting on the part of the US and RVN forces, the Tet Offensive failed and, in addition to the many Communist casualties, exposed the so-called "VC infrastructure" (local guerrillas and support forces). Taking advantage of this situation, the US and RVN initiated the Accelerated Pacification Campaign, with emphasis on exterminating the VC. This was made more effective by the Phoenix Program, a joint US/RVN covert assassination effort, aimed at VC shadow government personnel. The NVA later admitted that Phoenix was the most effective operation they faced. In effect, by 1969-70 the VC ceased to be a factor in the fight—US and RVN forces had effectively won the counterinsurgency.

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ACSC Quick-Look 05-08

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 2005		2. REPORT TYPE N/A		3. DATES COVERED -	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE ACSC Quick-Look: Vietnam: Current Operational Lessons From History				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Air University Maxwell AFB, AL				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release, distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 2	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

US withdrawal under the Nixon Administration was attended by several incursions into Laos and Cambodia to disrupt communist supply lines. The war was turned over to the RVN under the Vietnamization program, which extended additional weapons and training to the RVN Army. In addition, the previously neglected Regional Forces and Popular Forces were trained and armed, and proved to be effective soldiers. With Nixon's departure after the Watergate scandal, appropriations for ammunition and spare parts to the RVN were slashed, leaving the South vulnerable to conventional assault from the north. In 1975, the NVA, comprising 18 fully equipped conventional divisions, crushed the RVN in a massive assault.

Analysis. US forces fought two wars in Vietnam, the “big unit war” against the NVA and the “village war” against the VC. The two were never coordinated. The key to the big unit war would have been to cut the Laotian panhandle and establish a Korea-style DMZ across to Thailand. Outside assistance sustained the VC, who would have withered on the vine without support from the North. The counterinsurgency in the South was eventually won, but only after an emphasis was placed on the extermination of the insurgents. In sum, the qualities of the large US conventional units and the Special Forces were squandered in roles which failed to address the security of the RVN population for the bulk of the war. Climbing US casualty tolls eventually mandated a withdrawal from what was essentially an open-ended commitment to keep the RVN from being defeated. There was no positive or offensive goal or objective.

Relevance for Current Operations. While on the surface there may seem to be many more differences than similarities between Vietnam and Iraq, after closer analysis some parallels become evident.

1. The Vietnam insurgency was sustained by the DRV which was essentially a sanctuary. Current operations must deny Iraqi factions sanctuary areas in Iran, Syria, or within Iraq. Special Forces, indigenous scouts, and air/space surveillance must be leveraged to control the borders. Neighboring countries must be subjected to retaliation when insurgents or supplies are found within their borders.
2. Large conventional units waste a lot of effort in sweeps. In addition, they provide a target-rich environment for terrorists because of their logistical footprint. They also tend to reduce the legitimacy of the indigenous government by appearing as “occupation” forces. A few brigades placed in desert enclaves from which they can launch quick reaction strikes against sizeable enemy concentrations or border crossings would be more useful.
3. Special Forces and Civil Affairs units, used in a similar manner to those employed in Afghanistan, can keep a low profile while collecting valuable information from local populations. In addition, they can bring down a rain of conventional firepower when necessary. An expansion of special ops forces is called for—keeping in mind that *small wars require small war solutions* rather than big war solutions scaled down to “fit” the fight.
4. Only a proportion of insurgents are indigenous. The worst, including suicide bombers, are “foreign fighters.” These are distinguishable from Iraqis by other Iraqis, and should be systematically and ruthlessly exterminated by a Phoenix-like program. Money and patronage should be extended to those who assist us in this effort. Like Phoenix there will likely be some “mistakes” and some informers simply settling old scores, but that is the price to be paid for an effective operation.
5. Except for legitimate indigenous security and police forces, the population should be disarmed. The new Iraqi government must be encouraged to enact a policy of summary execution for “illegal combatants” found with RPGs, grenades, mortars, and other weapons or bomb-making material. According to the Geneva and Hague conventions, illegal combatants have no status as prisoners of war and may be dealt with summarily.